DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 110 CS 503 597

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TITLE Cop Talk and Media Use.
PUB DATE May 81
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (31st, Minneapolis, MN, May 21-25, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Research; *Discourse Analysis; *Language Usage; Mass Media; Media Research; Novels; *Police; Social Attitudes; Stereotypes; Television; *Work Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Media Role; Media Use

ABSTRACT

As part of a research project studying ways in which police "culture" is socially constructed and displayed in police talk, six members of a research team rode on patrol with officers of a small community police department, during all three shifts, for a period of four months. Conversations during the rides were recorded. Analysis of the conversations revealed many references to the mass media, indirectly disclosing media use. These observations in the social context of police work revealed three expressions of media use: (1) nicknames for officers drawn from the media were used to describe the irony and conflict police officers felt about themselves and their colleagues in relation to their community and society; (2) the police officers consistently used media expressions, specifically those from police novels, as a dramatic authentication of the value of police work; and (3) negative references to television police shows occurred frequently in explanations of the "real" world of police work. (HTH)

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# Cop Talk And Media Use

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A potent criticism of the methods used in the typical uses and gratifications paradigm is that the survey methods used impose a framework upon the respondent in which the subject must place his or her motivations for a particular class of behavior (for example see Greenberg, 1974, or Rubin, 1977, 1979). There is no little contradiction in this approach. The U and G perspective attempts to account for individually differentiated motivations for any class of behaviors (Rosengren and Wendahl, 1978). The imposition of a framework of explanation from an external source would appear to lessen the opportunity for the true expression of an individual's motivation. The individual is forced to find her motivation in the researcher's list. The justification for a common list is, of course, that there are common motivations among individuals, particularly individuals who share cultural membership. The use of an explanatory framework, however, on the one hand guarantees that the researcher will find a "shared" set of motivations but, on the other can provide no evidence of the validity of the list (for a more thorough analysis of this criticism see Anderson and Meyer, 1975 or 1978). The only way a respondent cannot share these motivations is to not respond. Survey approaches are immutably limited to the survey questions used.

While not without their own faults there are other methods which are more in tune with the intent of the U and G theoretical stance. Primarily these come from the rubric of Ethnology. Ethnological methods are presuppositionless -- a codeword used to describe the observation of freely occurring behavior. The present authors see little value in presenting yet another round in the tired debate of whether any observations

can be presuppositionless. The point of the distinction is simply that in ethnological studies, the expression of behavior by the respondent does not require an external suppositional framework but such suppositions are required in survey methods. Suppositionless methods of analysis are, of course, mythical.

The assumption in the application of ethnological methods to a U and G pardigm is that expressions of the socially dependent uses of and gratifications sought from the media will occur in the ordinary concourse of behavior within a social context. We use the phrases "socially dependent" and "social context" to signify those uses and gratifications which are shared by members of a common cultural identity and are part of the sense-making stories that these members tell one another in their social constructions. (Readers unfamiliar with or unwilling to deal with the phenomenological notion of "socially constructed reality" can simply substitute "societal" and "society" for the two aforementioned phrases.) Please note that we make no claim concerning wholly idiosyncratic uses and/or gratifications.

Ethnological studies begin with a curiosity of how things get done in a particular social construction. They are dependent on the observation of the ordinary, everyday behaviors which occur in that social reality. This ethnological study began with a curiosity of how being a police officer gets done and is based on 160 hours of observations of police officers both on and off duty. In sifting through these observations the present authors were struck by the re-occurring references to the media and the use of media content to reference one's own behavior both to outsiders and to members. In the pages that follow we present the significant observations which form the basis of our description of the socially

dependent uses and gratifications. That description, which we claim is extracted from those observations, is then presented.

Method

The research reported in the present article is part of a larger project on discovering the ways in which police "culture" is socially constructed and displayed in police talk. Six members of a research team intermittently rode with the patrol officers of the Valley View Police Department (a fictitious name) during regular shifts from February to May, 1980. No formal interviews were conducted with any of the officers. Rather, researchers sat in the patrol cars, talked with the officers, accompanied the officers on assignments, and took notes on what was said. All media references offered by the police were spontaneous; either part of their naturally-occurring talk or their method of formulating answers to the questions of researchers/ride alongs. No questions about the officers' media habits were ever asked, nor were any questions asked which would require a reference to the media. Research team members were involved in approximately 160 hours of conversation with the police.

Findings-Overview

The minutiae of any occupation is generally the privileged information of the persons so employed. Lack of exposure to the detail of the work of others is what makes possible the popularity of a book like Studs Terkel's Working (1975). We are all curious to know what the janitor or the receptionist or the advertising executive "really" does. Generally speaking, our ignorance of what these others "really" do necessarily means we operate with a limited or distorted view of what janitors or receptionists or advertising execs are all about. And although Terkel's

heroes and heroines occasionally complain about the fact that the public does not understand them and what they do, it is clear that those complaints are not a central preoccupation with those workers. The same claim can not be made for police.

Police in general, and the Valley View cops in particular, are quite concerned with what they perceive to be the uninformed--or worse, mis-informed--notions that most people have about police. And to a certain extent, this concern is genuinely legitmate. Cops must worry about what the citizenry of their community thinks of them. Citizens are the workaday audience of police performance and the local newspaper their critic. Interestingly, because police are so fully aware of their often negative evaluation by the public at large, there is a certain amount of both serious and playful discussion among them about what the police role is or should be. And so, not surprisingly, a large portion of police talk is an attempt to negotiate an acceptable definition of the "cop role" with citizens, with ride-alongs, and with other cops.

Valley View is a 10,000-person community whose city boundaries adjoin those of the state capital. Although it is an independent municipality, it seems more like one of many neighborhoods of the larger metropolitan center. The citizenry of Valley View is predominantly white, lower middle class.

There are fewer than 25 patrol officers on the Valley View police force. Most are young--the Chief with 10 years tenure on the force has been around the longest. Only one of the patrol officers is a woman.

Generally, three patrol officers and one sergeant are on duty on any given shift. The officers all ride in separate cars, and patrol different sections of the city, but whenever assistance is required,

they back each other up. They can communicate with one another over the city police radio, and they frequently arrange for coffee stops, lunch or dinner breaks, or other occasions to talk with their fellow officers.

Table 1 presents a tabulation of the recorded incidents that Valley View police responded to during the course of the research project. Although ride-alongs with the police were distributed across all three shifts--days, evening, and graveyards--and across all days of the week, they were not arranged with any preconsidered notions of statistical randomness. Thus, the incidents reveal an impression of Valley View police work, not a statistically meaningful representation.

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Table 1 about here

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It is important to note that there were no violent crimes witnessed by any of the research team members.* Valley View cops instead spend more of their time writing out traffic tickets and dealing with "civil problems," the hassles of the citizenry which are for the cops personal hassles as well. Underreported in the table are the number of times the cops stopped to get coffee or eat. These breaks happened with such frequency that their importance as a recordable incident was quickly diminished. Nonetheless, even the recorded 17 stops at the 7-11 and 8 stops at various other eateries give substance to a lieutenant's comment, "If you want to find a cop, look in a coffee shop." Clearly, the conclusion

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*According to the FBI Uniform Crime Index, homocide, forcible rape, aggravated assault, and armed robberty constitute violent crime.

to be drawn from the table is that police work, at least in Valley View, is relatively uneventful, cops spending many hours in their patrol cars cruising the streets, waiting and watching for something to do. And when something finally does happen, it tends not to be a headline grabbing event. It is within this specific context of police work that the Valley View cops' conversation, and use of media, must be interpreted.

Findings-Media Related

In their talk that attempts to define their role as cops, the police often employ references to the entertainment media. "Starsky and Hutch," "Adam-12," "Kojak," and the works of Joseph Wambaugh all provide grist for role definition. Media references by the Valley View cops allow them to define their roles in three ways:

1) by using media nicknames, they provide a commentary on their role performance,
2) by talking the way media cops do, they dramatize or "spice up" their role performance, and most importantly,
3) by contrasting their role performances with the media presentation of cops, they make claims about "how it really is."

In the remainder of this section, these uses of the media are exemplified by conversational evidence taken from transcripts of the various ride-alongs.

Media nicknames as commentary

Job-related nicknames, although not an exclusive preserve of the working class, tend to be more common among blue collar than white collar workers. Nicknames are not offered by the worker, but are instead bestowed upon him by other workers, and are generally selected to reflect something quintessential about the worker. Having a nickname is generally regarded

positively, as a sign of (some kind of) acceptance by one's labor compatriots. Many of the nicknames of the Valley View cops are taken from the media, and are used to reflect something quintessential about the specific cop, or about cop work in general. The specific sense of the commentary of a media nickname derives from the way the nickname straightforwardly or ironically plays off of media reality.

One cop is known to the Highway Patrol as "Bogart." This cop is devoutly religious, has a pudgy, innocent face, and in a year and a half of being on the Valley View force has yet to be in a fistfight--surely an anomaly among Valley View cops. The cop does not want to be perceived as someone who backs down, and is diligently working on self-defense techniques taught by an ex-prison guard. "I think the training has been good for me," he says, "it's given me confidence. When I get into something, I'm right there, right in the middle and I don't back down. I think when these creeps see I'm not afraid, they're willing to be reasonable." The nickname "Bogart" thus speaks to a recognition that the cop's attempt at toughness is a cultivated image.

Another cop is known as Mr. Bill. Mr. Bill--a "Saturday Night Live" character who is constantly getting beaten, smashed, and dumped on--provides a powerful image for the Valley View cops who tend to believe that they are constantly being abused by the citizenry. That the particular cop is known as Mr. Bill is possibly a comment on his size--he is easily the largest cop on the force.

Another nickname which is used by members of Valley View's detective division is Kojak. Unlike the TV Kojak who works on and solves interesting cases, the detectives in Valley View have a frustrating lot. Most of their investigations are of petty theft--from houses or unlocked

automobiles. Most times, there are no witnesses from whom a description of the suspect can be skillfully pried, there are no fingerprings conveniently left on a window ledge, and the victim cannot think of anyone who might want to do him harm. Most of such crimes go unsolved, attributed to "juveniles," but only after considerable paperwork. The nickname of Kojak for one of the detectives then is a commentary by irony and counterpoint. Not unsurprisingly, the detective so addressed is the one whose hair is the curliest of all the detectives on the force.

The most institutionalized nickname is bestowed on the sole motorcylce cop on the force. The parking space for his motorcycle is one of only two designated parking spaces (the other is for the Chief)--and it is labelled by a painted sign "Valley View's CHPs--Pete Lacey." Again, the commentary is contrapuntal. Lacey is no Erik Estrada, and his typical duties involve handing out one speeding ticket after another--not quite the highway drama of CHPs. Lacey himself denigrates his (from his point of view) under-powered motorcycle, and cannot wait until he can convince the Chief to get the department to buy him a "real" one.

Perhaps the most involved nickname belongs to a cop by the name of Mike. Mike is a very proper young officer who uses his seat belt and neither smokes nor drinks nor swears. He is called "Mikey" after the young boy in the Life cereal commercial. But he is so named not simply because of his youthful innocence. Rather, whenever a Valley View cop sees or picks up a sleazy woman--drunk, whacked out on drugs, or hustling tricks--someone will say, "Give her to Mikey, he'll eat anything." And thus, by an implication of oral sex, the wholesomeness of breakfast cereal is transformed into the unwholesomeness of sleazy women, and a comment is made on police reality and the seamy side of life.

Media cop talk as authentic drama

Generally, Valley View cops believe that the entertainment media misrepresent police work. One particular media portrayal of cops, however, is seen as somehow more "authentic" and authenticating. That is the work of Joseph Wambaugh, whose years of experience with LAPD may make his novels seem more credible. In a sense, Wambaugh is as unrepresentative of Valley View police life as is TV treatment of cops, and the police recognize this. But Wambaugh is an authentic cop, he has real police experience, and therefore he is accorded a value and respect not accorded other media portrayals of cops. And because Wambaugh is accorded that respect, that sense of authenticity, then to talk like Wambaugh is to talk like a real cop to authenticate one's behavior. And for guys who spend most of their time driving up one street and down another, talking like a real cop is indeed an important consideration.* And so terms Wambaugh uses in his novels have been picked up, occasionally modified, and used as jargon by the Valley View cops.

One example of media cop talk arose when an officer drove by a man who was sitting in a stopped car. The researcher/ride-along noted that

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*One cop told of a brief experiment the VVPD tried in using "clear speech" on the police radio instead of the "10 code." Clear speech is normal English, and police were supposed to express everything in normal fashion, for example, "I am stopping a blue Pinto for speeding. Its license plate is A-R-C-2-1-3." The "10 code" translates this into "I'm on a 10-65 on a blue Pinto, Alpha-Roger-Cobra-two-one-three." The cop admitted he was glad the clear speech experiment failed, because he felt such talk was a bit demeaning, not "professional" enough.

the man seemed to change his behavior when he became aware of their presence. The cop replied that the man was exhibiting "black and white jitters." The cop went on to say that he had a strategy of tailing someone obtrusively until the suspect got so nervous that he did something wrong and the cop could pull him over with probable cause. "Black and white jitters" is a phrase that makes reference to the cop belief that those who are guilty have reason to be nervous or jittery in the presence of cops, who in Los Angeles, patrol in "black and white" patrol cars. "Black and white" is, of course, a media phrase; the VVPD cars are not black and white, but silver-gray. However, rather than call the behavior "the silver-gray jitters," the cops refer to it as "black and white," maintaining what they consider to be authentic terminology of cops.

Even more striking, and certainly more frequently used, are two Wambaugh neologisms identifying "types" of people cops typically have to deal with. Valley View cops, like most cops, are fond of the word "asshole" as a descriptor for the ordinary person they have contact with. An "asshole" is someone who speeds, or runs a stop sign, or tries to register her dog at the police station, or leaves his keys in the ignition of his car, where someone might steal it. "Assholes" represent the majority of the people that cops come in contact with, or, as one cop poetically put it, "the masses are asses."

But the Valley View cops have two other descriptors which discriminate two other "types" of characters from "regular assholes." Both words were lifted from Wambaugh's novel The Choirboys. One is "scrote"; the other is "dirtbag." In The Choirboys, "scrote" is a descriptor coined by one of the officers who is looking for a word that captures all of the nuance of "nigger," but that extends to all of humanity, not just blacks.

"Dirtbag" is not explicitly defined in the novel, and is mentioned only once in a throwaway sentence with an implied meaning equivalent to "punk" or "creep."

In the living vocabular of the VVPD, the two words have taken on a more specific meaning. "Scrote" has come to refer to 19-24 year old white males with long, stringy, and generally unwashed hair, who often sport pencil thin mustaches and display a sullen attitude toward the cops. "Dirtbag" refers to someone who is not strictly guilty of an offense, but who has provoked the wrath of the cops. A store owner whose alarm keeps going off for no better reason than the wind is blowing furiously is a "dirtbag," the cops spending what seems to them excessive time responding to his false alarms and waiting around til he shows up to turn them off. Also, a woman who eggs her husband on to the point where he "pops her one" is also considered a "dirtbag."*

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*One of the authors talked with an Idaho State Patrol office who used the word "asshole" to describe someone he had run into the night before. The author then told the cop he had done a study of a police force where they too had used the word "asshole" to describe people. The author went on to say the cops also used two words from Joseph Wambaugh books and wondered if other police forces, like maybe the Idaho Highway Patrol, used those words as well. The cop smiled and said, "Let's see, 'scrote' and uh something 'bag,' 'dirtbag.' No we don't use them. They're unprofessional. You might hear some small town police force use those kind of words, Some of them have a 'Joseph Wambaugh' syndrome." The interesting thing was, of course, that the state trooper, for his disavowal of using the words, knew them and their source with little hesitation.

"Scrote" and "dirtbag," like "black and white jitters" serves to link VVPD with the major leagues of the police world-LAPD. As such, they are words of drama, and words that help the cops hear their own talk as that of authentic police.

Dissociation from media cops and claims about the way it really is

Media nicknames and media cop talk are part of the naturally occurring dialogue of one Valley View cop with another. References to the media as a way of making claims about police reality seem more likely to be fortuitous use of the media made relevant by the presence of researchers/ridealongs. Researchers/ridealongs are presumed to be ignorant of what police work is really like, and media portrayals of police are a shared reference point from which the cops can diverge. (It should be noted that references to media portrayals of police would or could serve the same function for the cops in off-job interactions with family, neighbors, strangers they meet in bars, and so forth.) By separating themselves from the referent of media cops, the Valley View police make claims about what their experience is, and how it should be understood. These claims fall in two categories: over-representation of the dramatic and failure to represent the full complexity of police work. On this use of the media content, the officers showed themselves to be highly familiar with police shows, characters and plots. They could reference them easily and expected the listener to be similarly competent and aware, as one cop stated, "Everybody watches cop shows."

One of the most obvious differences between media police work and police work in Valley View is the essentially uneventful nature of what is portrayed as eventful. (See Table 1.) As one cop lamented during a particularly slow shift:

> "Hell, the cop shows do ten times what we do. I mean, you look at Adam-12. Man, those guys do in eight hours what I do in a year. And you take some of the others, you know, Police Story's another one they do in eight hours what we do in a year."

This same cop later cracked, "I wish I was a movie star cop. I could have something to do. I wouldn't have to drive around lookin' for tickets, lookin' for creeps."

A second touch of unreality perpetuated by the media, according to the cops, is the portrayal of cops as too good and criminals as too bad. One cop complained about the extent to which the media goes "overboard" to "really build up the bad guy" as bad. And "Adam-12," for him, was an example of where the media went "overboard on the good cop thing." There is a certain suspicion among some social commentators and social scientists as well that many cops have an "authoritarian personality" and prefer to see the world in simple good and bad terms. Certainly this cop, and many on the Valley View force, perceived media representation of cops and robbers in good and bad terms to be askew. In fact, the cops seemed to prefer that researchers/ridealongs not perceive them as "good guys," but just as guys like anybody else doing a job.

The more interesting use of references to media portrayal of cops was on those occasions when the cops were describing the nuances <u>behind</u> overt police behavior. In these cases, the media portrayals were still seen as being unrepresentative, but the primary issue was on what was hidden behind the misrepresentation.

One cop, who is fond of talking about the gore and gruesome accidents that have been part of his experience, became philosophical when the discussion turned to what it was like to kill a man.

> "You know, until you had to do it, you don't know what it

> is. Too many people watch Gunsmoke or Kojak, they watch Efrem Zimbalist Jr. shoot five or six guys a night, and they think that's popcorn and candy. Bullshit. You know, they think about, you know, everybody's gone out when they're a kid a gone 'wow, man, I took my BB gun and shot a sparrow, whoopteedoo!' People think killing people's like that. It's not."

The point of this discussion was not simply that people do not get an accurate picture of what it is to kill somebody from watching TV (although that is certainly part of the point). Rather, the point has to do with some background understanding of police work that is obscured by such media presentations. For this cop, the problem with the media portrayal of killing is that it obscures the fact that cops don't like to kill--not because they feel remorse when they kill someone (which they may or may not feel)--but because killing someone is regarded as a sign of failure. Killing is the technique of last resort, and for a cop to have to do it, the cop must have failed to handle the situation in all ways short of killing: talking, reasoning, threatening, even attempts at physical restraint must first have failed. Thus, any media portrayal of a cop who blows a guy away, or worse, who blows five or six guys away in any one night, is not only being unrealistic, but it is also being ignorant of what goes on in cop reality <u>behind</u> killing.

A second example along these lines is the media portrayal of cops as swashbuckling go-getters whose ability to apprehend the guilty is limited only by their own daring and skill. The VVPD lieutenant who spoke to the researchers during an orientation session preliminary to any of the ridealongs felt the need to counter this media image. "This isn't Starsky and Hutch," he said. But his point was more than the media portray cops inaccurately. Again, he wanted to comment on what was behind that misrepresentation. So he continued, "TV cops don't have to play by

the rules. We do." And it turned out that much of the discussion of cop work the researchers heard revolved around this theme. The cops' general argument was that their effectiveness was so hampered by all the laws surrounding suspect rights, and rules governing search and seizure with probable cause, and various legal technalities that they were prevented from apprehending, in some cases, the person they "knew" to be guilty of a crime.

A final example of this misrepresentation of both the surface and depths of police reality is seen in the penchant of TV cops to be less than prudently suspicious. One cop complains that CHPs "go into situations where no cop in his right mind would go with his gun in the holster. I don't believe I've ever seen them go in, well, maybe once or twice with their guns out. Like Charlie's Angels and all that, good lord!" Again, it is not simply that the media portrayal is, from their point of view, inaccurate. It is that the inaccuracy belies a misunderstanding of the extent to which police work is predicated on the profoundest suspicions of the ill will of others, and on the absolute need to be prepared for the worst in all situations. Because of the possible consequences of being caught off guard, cops definitely subscribe to the adage -- "better safe than sorry."

Thus, with various references to shows such as "Adam-12," "Kojak," "Police Story," and "CHPS," the Valley View cops dissociate themselves and their experiences from those of media cops, and this very dissociation makes an alternative claim about how it really is, and those things behind "real" police reality.

Theoretical Considerations

The notion that media content of diverse source and type might be

utilized to generate nicknames for social commentary is a particularly helpful exemplar of the difficulties within the uses and gratifications paradigm.* Most data collections define "use" in terms of idiosyncratic and immediate responses to a medium and often its specific content (e.g., sports "adds excitement to my day," Gantz, 1980.) Others adopt a larger, more social emphasis (e.g., I read the newspaper "to know what is going on in the nation," Anon., 1980). Few look at "use" as an appearance mutating in the variety of contexts in which each of us operates and from which our gratifications flow.

It would appear useful to distinguish two clearly different variables--attendance to the media and media use. In our thinking, attendance is part of the normal social concourse of cultural membership. It is a price we pay for this membership in industrial societies. The media are institutionalized resources much like the other communication institutions of society--the family, church, school, etc. We attend to the media for much the same reason that we attend to one another.

Our uses (and therefore gratifications) will display different configurations as we shift from context to context. Media use is best explained in context as an element of context. We would hardly argue that the generation of nicknames for social commentary is a use transcendant of context--a trait of behavior that we would generally expect of all respondents. Rather we would argue that this use is a part of the characteristics of the social context of police work and may be a

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*The likelihood that a survey writer would construct an item like "I watch television to find nicknames for my work-friends," or that a respondent would rate it as high in explanation seem extremely low.

characteristic of other contexts as yet unknown to us.

The use of media as a source of nicknames made meaningful by the juxtaposition of the media character with the social context of its appearance is not suggested as a "motive" for viewing. Nor is it suggested that this nicknaming occurring in police work will be of the same quality as nicknaming that may appear in other contexts. Rather, we suggest that uses appear and disappear according to the social constructions. Use, then, appears in context and is not a generalized, socially acceptable verbal expression for explaining one's use.

Finally in this discussion we would disabuse the notion that we are arguing a primacy of perspective. Surveys of uses and gratifications provide heuristic information of the relative acceptability of explanations for media related behavior. Neither that approach nor an ethnological one, however, defines antecedent conditions. Survey research is ultimately and absolutely limited to the ability of the survey construction to provide a good expression of plausible explanation; ethnological studies to the time and space of the observational frame.

Conclusions

1. Observations in the social context of police work surfaced three expressions of media use within that context:

*Media nicknames as commentary was suggested to describe the irony and conflict police officers felt about themselves and their colleagues in relation to the larger social universe.

*Media cop talk as a dramatic authentication of the value of police work was used to describe the common awareness and use of terms appearing in certain novels.

*The use of television police shows as a negative referent appear regularly

in the police officers explanation of the "real" world of cops.

2. It was argued that the uses and gratifications paradigm could benefit from the separation of the concepts of media attendance and media use. Media attendance, it was argued, was a necessary part of cultural membership. In short, it has become a culturally assimilated behavior. Media use on the other hand appears in social contexts. It is an expression limited to and part of the context of its appearance.

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Table 1
List of recordable incidents during ride-along period

45 stops for traffic citations, 4 driving under the influence, some citations, some warnings,

14 burglary alarms, 11 false,

13 suspicious persons or incidents, such as a man standing outside a Texaco station at night,

7 traffic accidents, 1 serious injury,

7 domestic incidents, ranging from physical abuse to a woman who wanted to file a complaint against her husband for harboring a dangerous animal--a rattlesnale on the loose--in their apartment,

5 vandalisms,

4 gas thefts,

3 disturbing the peace,

3 drunks,

3 civil problems,

3 inquiries from the public,

2 assaults

2 medical emergencies